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SUBJECT: Presidential Elections To Take Place In March 2006

Ref: A) Minsk 1495

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Classified by Ambassador George Krol for Reasons 1.4 (B,D)

11. (C) Summary: On December 16, the Belarusian Parliament in a suddenly announced extraordinary session unanimously approved March 19, 2006, as the date for holding presidential elections. Rumors about holding the elections in March started to circulate in November, although Belarusian election officials had been indicating the elections would most likely be held in July. It is probably not a coincidence that the Parliament's "decision" came the day after President Lukashenko returned from meeting with Russian President Putin in Sochi. There Putin reportedly promised Lukashenko Russia would continue to supply Belarus with highly subsidized energy deliveries in 2006 Q key support for Lukashenko that may have sealed his decision on a March date. What the Russians will get in return is not clear but Gazprom's gaining full control of Belarus' gas transit network and/or acceleration toward a union state would fulfill major Russian objectives that Lukashenko has been withholding. It is also not entirely out of the question that Russia's support may also entail an agreement from Lukashenko to find a successor acceptable to Russia to be announced before the end of the year when all candidates must legally declare their intention to run. In any event, the decision to hold the elections in March may be the last nail in the coffin the regime has been fashioning for the opposition over the past several months. It clearly complicates, if not virtually destroys, the small and poorly supported Belarusian opposition's chances to challenge Lukashenko or any GOB candidate either before or after the elections. It is also conveniently timed to prevent Western aid to the opposition from playing any effective role in the elections as well as takes advantage of the West's chronic difficulty in reacting to events in Belarus. For Russia, March elections may also conveniently remove Belarus as a complication for the 2006 G-8 summit in St. Petersburg in July since by then Moscow may hope its G-8 partners will have resigned themselves to the post election situation in Belarus. End Summary.

Following Lukashenko-Putin Meeting, Parliament Goes Into Action

12. (SBU) Immediately following President Lukashenko's December 15 meeting with Russian President Putin in Sochi, press reports indicated the Lower House would convene on December 16 in an extraordinary session to set the date of the elections. (Note: The press offices of both presidents released statements confirming the presidents discussed the upcoming elections in Belarus.) At 10am (local time) on December 16 the Speaker of Parliament convened a plenary session to review a legislative decree drafted earlier in the morning by the Committee on State System Building, Local Self-Governance, and Rules of Procedure. Independent journalists observing the process in the Parliament building told Emboffs that Central Electoral Commission Lydia Yermoshina and Deputy Head of the Presidential Administration

Natalia Petkevich were participants in the committee session. Once drafted, the decree was immediately sent to the plenary session and was approved in a unanimous decision. Article 81 of the Constitution stipulates that the setting of election dates falls exclusively under the purview of the Lower House. The Upper House and President Lukashenko do not need to ratify the decree.

Next Steps in the Election Process

13. (U) Deputy and Secretary of the CEC Nikolai Lozovik told Pol/Econ Chief that prospective presidential candidates must make a formal application to the CEC by December 23. The application must include names of those citizens who will make up the "group of support," which have at least 100 members. The CEC will have up to five days to verify the identity and legal status of the candidates and their respective support groups. Once the CEC approves the candidates and their support groups, the candidates will have 30 days, or until January 27, to collect 100,000 signatures of support from voters. The CEC will then take up to 10 days to verify a sample portion of each set of signatures. Thus, the names of those candidates who will appear on the election ballot will not be known by February 10. (Note: Opposition leaders expect the verification of signatures to be a pivotal point in the campaign, because the CEC will have complete discretion on determining the validity of signatures. The CEC in past elections have frequently disqualified candidates by claiming many of their signatures are false.)

Why In March? Q The Official Reasons

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14. (C) Lozovik told Pol/Econ Chief that the Lower House was perfectly within their right to set the elections in March. When Pol/Econ Chief reminded Lozovik that many government officials, including his boss CEC Chairwoman Lydia Yermoshina, made statements indicating the elections would likely be held in July, he maintained that the scheduling of elections is the sole prerogative of Parliament. Lozovik added that Article 81 of the Constitution stipulates only that presidential elections have to be held two months prior to the expiration of the current president's term, or July, and the elections have to be announced no later than five months prior to the expiration of the president's term. Thus, Parliament could schedule the elections anytime up until July 19.

15. (C) Lozovik commented that spring elections would be more "convenient" for voters and the candidates than summer elections. According to Lozovik, summer is a time for vacations and rest, not elections. The CEC official speculated that March elections would be better for the candidates because a higher concentration of voters, particularly students, will be in the cities and therefore more likely to participate in the voting on Election Day.

Why in March? Q The More Likely Reasons

16. (C) The opposition greatly feared the elections would be called in March, as it would give them little time to advance their cause among the Belarusian electorate, although the regime has done everything else to prevent contact between the opposition and the people. The 10+ coalition candidate, Aleksandr Milinkevich, convened an emergency meeting of the campaign team on December 16 to discuss strategy in light of the new election date. When DAS David Kramer met with Milinkevich's campaign team during his December 5-6 visit Minsk, campaign manager Sergey Kalyakin admitted that if the elections were held in March, the campaign would suffer a fatal blow (reftel). (Note: Kalyakin separately told Econoff that President

Lukashenko would consider elections in March to take advantage of the public relations campaign surrounding the delivery of the S-300 missile systems by Russia and to the commissioning of the last two co-prescor stations on the Yamal-Europa g`s pipeli.e.)

Comment

¶7. (C) Lukashenko's decision to hold the elections in March (in Belarus the parliament is only a rubber stamp for presidential directives) may be another brilliant move by this master politician/dictator to seal completely the opposition's fate and his own sure victory in extending his rule yet again next year. Belarus' small and weakly supported opposition, already inhibited by the regime's increasingly draconian measures aimed at preventing contact with the people and the outside world, will probably not be able to mount an effective challenge to Lukashenko by March. It is also hard to believe that a significant number of Belarusians will be sufficiently stimulated to go into the streets by March as so many now seem resigned to their fate. Moreover, any Western aid or radio projects will probably be too little and, more importantly, too late to have any effect on the March elections. It may also be difficult for any real opposition candidate to collect the required 100,000 signatures needed by January to actually run in the race. The regime may also have calculated that with Russian support locked in, a united Western stand against Lukashenko will be difficult if not impossible to achieve. Lukashenko may also have considered that Ukrainian elections in March will garner greater international attention and international observer participation.

¶8. (C) What is not clear is what may have been Russia's price in return for Putin agreeing to continue supplying Belarus cheap energy & the crucial support for the Lukashenko regime that probably sealed Lukashenko's decision to set the March date. Gazprom chairman Miller may have the answer in his public remarks that Gazprom's achieving full control over Belarus' pipeline network would fulfill a major Russia demand that Lukashenko has been withholding. Acceleration of the union state may also be a part of the quid pro quo as the two presidents reportedly agreed that the Supreme Council would meet later this month to advance the process & another key Russian objective.

¶9. (C) We also do not rule out that Putin may have achieved agreement from Lukashenko to name a successor acceptable to Russia who might be announced by the end of the year, as that is the deadline under Belarusian law for candidates to make formal

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their intention to contest the elections. Some sources have indicated this had been a major condition Putin had made to Lukashenko when they met in Sochi in the summer. If this scenario were to happen, it could follow the example of Yeltsin's "elegant," if not abrupt, departure in 1999 when he announced his resignation in his end of year message and named Putin to succeed him with elections that followed in March. Chief of Presidential Administration Viktor Sheiman's recent visit to Moscow probably was to set up the Sochi meeting and perhaps iron out the final issues for agreement, including on a successor. But this is pure speculation on our part.

¶10. (C) Russia may have also calculated that by agreeing to support Lukashenko and agreeing to the March elections (no doubt Lukashenko informed Putin ahead of his decision) Belarus will be removed as an issue complicating the G-8 summit in Russia in July. Perhaps Moscow hopes the West will be resigned to the situation in Belarus by then.

¶11. (C) In these scenarios Russia and Lukashenko would be winners although Lukashenko might view a secure retirement differently if that were part of the deal. The biggest losers would be Belarusian democrats and possibly Belarus' de facto independence if Russia secures control over the Belarusian

economy and possibly polity in a union state.

Krol